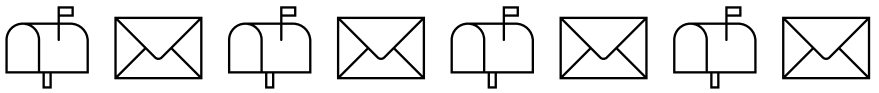
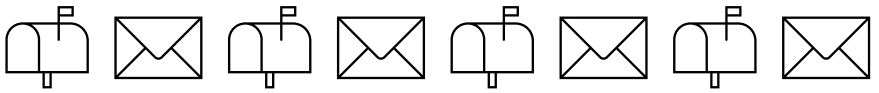


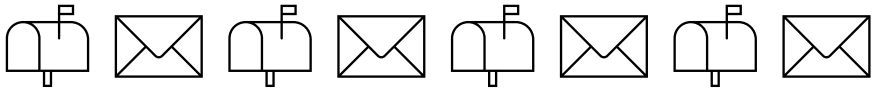
HELLO!



I am an EXTREME snail mail enthusiast. In a typical month, I send ~50 pieces of mail, from postcards to packages. I'd like to share some facts & information about snail mail for the novice or experienced correspondent.

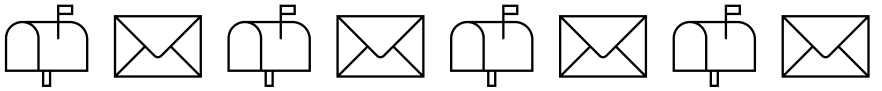
Amanda Murphyao

Revised 2026



How to Start

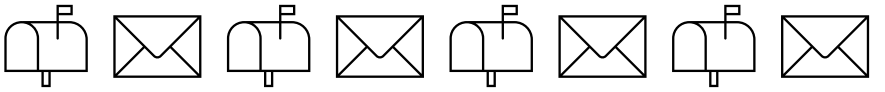
When I was 5 years old, I corresponded with someone in India that I had met on a family trip. I still have his letters and the carved elephants he sent. I think this story might contribute to the idea that pen-palling is for children, but I also wrote to my great-great-aunt until she was 106! Letters are for anyone of any age who likes friendship & surprises in their mailbox.



In it for the long haul...

One pen friend and I started writing to each other in 1998. We write to each other 2-3 times each month, despite kids, work, house- and pet-related disasters, and other distractions!

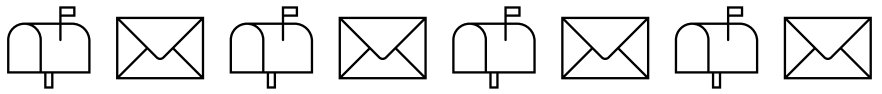
She recently sent me a slew of postcards and a very fun package that I am behind on replying to – but pen palling isn't about pressure & perfection! It's about communication & connection.



Pen Pal Organizations

I have really enjoyed my experience as a member of the League of Extraordinary Pen Pals. I erratically participate in postcrossing.com & I'm a member of the Handwritten Letter Appreciation Society.

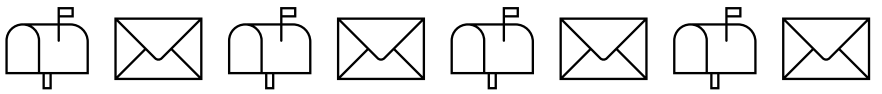
Instagram has also been a good place to find folx to swap zines, prints, postcards, or Trader Joe's themed mail (using their fun packaging, natch).



Pen Pal Organizations

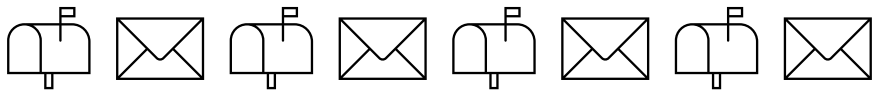
I was briefly in The Letter Exchange (LEX). Sadly, several organizations are now defunct, including the Letter Writer's Association, Victorian Letter Writer's Guild, & sendsomething.net (although they may have a Facebook group).

I'm listing these here in case you want to expand your own epistolary horizons!



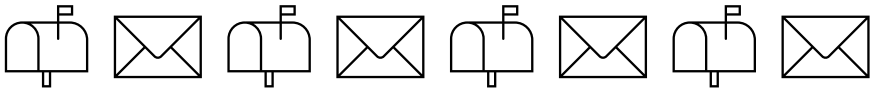
League of Extraordinary Pen Pals

Another plug for the League of Extraordinary Pen Pals (which does have a nominal member fees): they offer a monthly list of writing prompts and a supportive group that sends mail to anyone in the group who needs some extra happy mail in their box. You can also send something randomly based on people's interests with no expectation of a reply, or you can participate in themed swaps!



Pro-Social Much?

Snail mail strikes me as a generally pro-social hobby, so joining a group of pro-social hobbyists has worked out relatively well. As in all things, your mileage may vary & you can get some unsavory mail but, overall, the positive has outweighed the questionable for me. I've gotten hilarious stickers, mildly inappropriate postcards, unique postage stamps, fun washi, lovely letters, & lifelong friends.

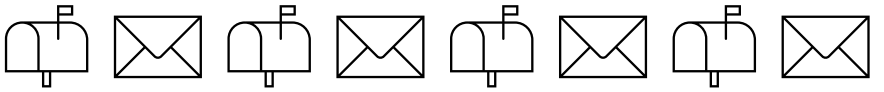


Fan Mail

In the e-mail era, handwritten notes can really stand out.

For example, I wrote to author Mary Robinette Kowal (letter written on a typewriter and zine enclosed about her work) & she sent a delightful reply!

Once upon a time, I sent fan mail to Noam Chomsky, who replied with something along the lines of “Thank you for your letter.”

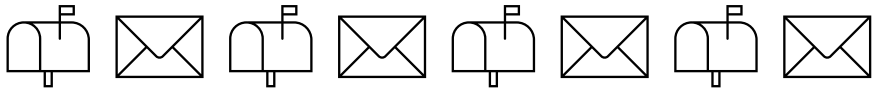


More Fan Mail

I once wrote to the humor columnist Dave Barry when his daughter was born because I had a box of cards for every occasion.

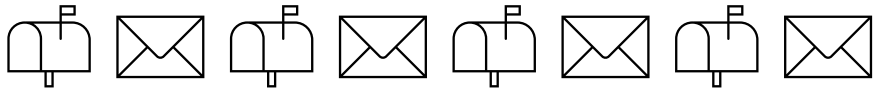
As I was maybe 10 years old at the time, I didn't have many peers to send the "Congratulations on your new baby" card to, so I sent it to him. He wrote back: “Thanks!”

In 2026, I sent him my collage chapbook about guns (“the dave barry / beatrix potter mash-up you didn’t know you needed”).



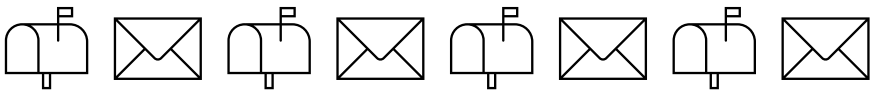
Even More Fan Mail

During quarantimes, the kids and I sent fan mail to Laurie Berkner of The Laurie Bernker Band. She sent back a signed postcard, which I thought was very nice. We also wrote to Lori Lightfoot, the former-mayor of Chicago, who did not reply, and President Joe Biden, who did. (It said something like “stay in school,” hilarious advice for homeschoolers.)



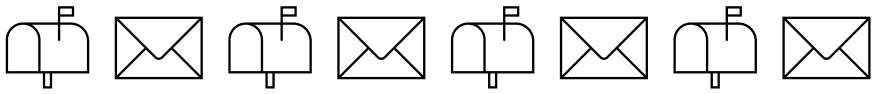
Things To Mail

The letter is a timeless classic, but there are also postcards, puns, washi samples (wrapped around a playing card), tea bags, books, stickers, letter in a bottle (kits available, but any bottle will do, properly sealed and labelled), potatoes, & various “tuck-ins” – stamps, puzzle pieces, artistamps (artistic stamps), game cards, zines... flat is easiest but many things are possible!



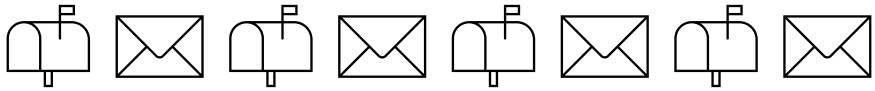
An Abundance of Tuck-Ins

There is far too much stuff available to fancy up your mail (from etsy, Instagram, the craft store...), & I can't even begin to list all the sources of stickers, pens, washi, and stationery, but some nice ways to make your own artistamps are with the kits from Portland Stamp Co. You can also make your own greeting cards & writing paper using products found around the home! (And internet inspiration!)



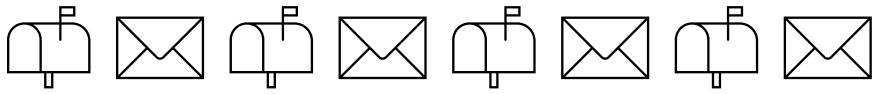
Get Creative

Silly tuck-ins don't have to be expensive (and it's probably better if they aren't, in case the mail never arrives!). I like to get old map puzzles from thrift stores and send the suitable shape to a pen friend, or send old trivia game cards that are relevant to their interests, or send a single Tarot card or goofy blank postcard for them to pass along.



Postal Decolonization

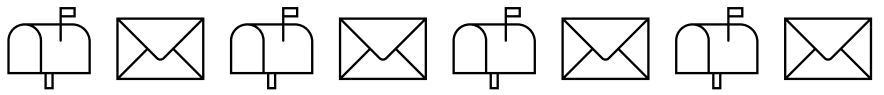
One thoughtful practice is to look up the treaties that cover the territory where you live (if you're in the US, Canada, Australia, etc), and / or check out the treaties for the area you're writing to and include the treaties & Indigenous toponyms on your letter. Native-land.ca and Wikipedia are good places to start.



Postage Prices

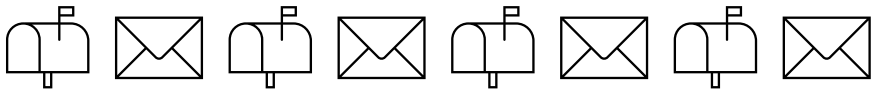
Any list would immediately become outdated, so I'm not including current USPS postage prices, but there are specific rates for media mail (like zines!), postcards, letters, international letters, potatoes, & messages in a bottle. You can combine old (unused) stamps & you can always use "Forever" stamps... but I know some countries have ELIMINATED their postal service.

horrified gasp



On Letter Length

I like getting any length of letter. Even if it's very short - someone took the time to think of you, write something down, stick a stamp on it, and somehow send it to you (post box, post office, etc.). Sometimes I feel like I have to reply "in kind" and there is no way I can write a ten-page (typed, single spaced, 10 point font) reply to a ten-page letter.



Delays & Disconnects

In pen-pal-ery, as IRL, it's hard to have a disconnect. For example, I have long stretches of not really having time to sit down and reply properly to people, & some folx have previously told me that they are disappointed in my turnaround time.

It's hard that our pen-friendship is not for now, but it's nice when people reach out to each other, even briefly.

Snail mail is a means of connection, not perfection. You don't have to have the perfect purple gel pen to write on unicorn paper with coordinating stickers & washi for the envelope –just get something in the mailbox! I once sent a postcard cut out of a cereal box, and the receiver was delighted.

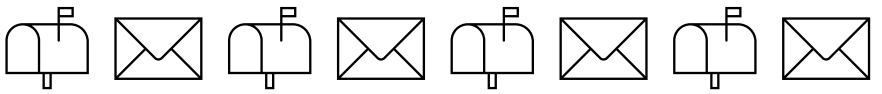
Which of all my important nothings should I tell you first? As I sit staring at this blank page I am asking myself that very same question.

– Jane Austen,

1 April 1816

“Should I attach
the label Handle
With Care and beg
for my story to be
delivered?”

– Kim Hyesoon



If you'd like to

exchange snail mail,

you can reach me at:

murphyao.ink@gmail.com

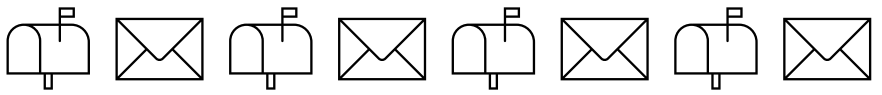
Interesting trades considered! (I make Artist Trading Cards, zines, artistamps, linocut, and other paper crafts.)

Mailboxes in Late Winter

By Jeffrey Harrison

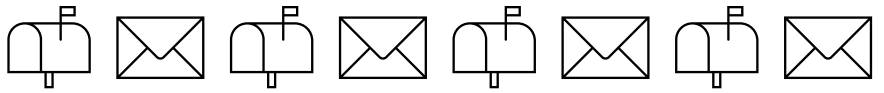
It's a motley lot. A few still stand
at attention like sentries at the ends
of their driveways, but more lean
askance as if they'd
just received a blow
to the head,
and in fact they've received
many, all winter,
from jets of wet snow
shooting off the curved, tapered blade
of the plow. Some look wobbly, cocked
at oddball angles
or slumping forlornly
on precariously listing posts. One box
bows steeply forward, as if in disgrace, its door
lolling sideways, unhinged.

battered, streaked with rust, bandaged in
duct tape,
crisscrossed with clothesline or bungee
cords.
A few lie abashed in
remnants of the very snow
that knocked them
from their perches.
Another is wedged in the
crook of a tree
like a birdhouse,
its post shattered nearby.
I almost feel sorry for them, worn out
by the long winter,
off-kilter, not knowing
what hit them,
trying to hold themselves
together, as they wait
for news from spring.



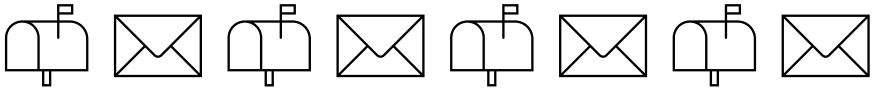
Mismatch & Moving On

Letting go of expectations, I think any length letter is okay (as long as the person doesn't require a reply of the same length!). Sometimes, there is a mismatch in pen pal expectations or availability, just like friendships IRL, and it’s hard when that happens, but it’s okay to say “thanks for your time!” and keep moving along with the rest of your pen friendships!



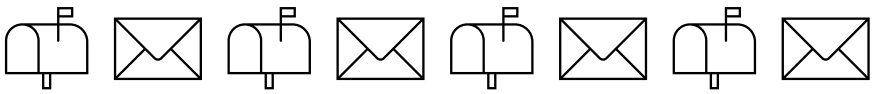
Friendship

Pen pal clubs can be a good way to find people who want (or at least intend) to write back. Writing letters (and birthday cards, and anytime cards!) is a great way to socialize during quarantimes – and a great way to socialize if you're parenting children, because you can write on a clipboard on the go during karate practice, and no one (from your end of things, at least) will interrupt the reader when they finally get your message!



No Pressure

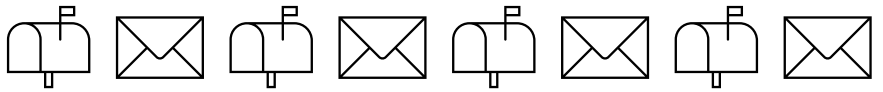
You don't have to get (or send) a handmade envelope with historical postage stamps that match the theme of the stationery as well as accompanying themed inserts. It’s about sharing what's going on in your life, & continuing a conversation / friendship, in whatever format that takes - typed, handwritten, or a quick note jotted on the back of a fortune cookie fortune!



Be Cool

I used to be disgruntled about getting typed letters. The form letter template can still be a bit grating to read, but I have realized that the important thing is to connect & not everyone has the stamina to hold a pen! Or they are worried about their handwriting. Or they have to say the same thing to many people (like a "holiday update"). Or they just prefer to type!

Now, I like to send TouchNote postcards from an app.

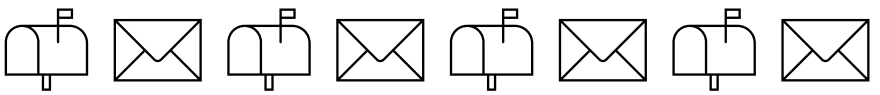


Finding Pen Pals

One strategy I used is writing an “intro zine,” not unlike a typed form letter, but a bit more fun to get in the mail

(or so I've been told!).

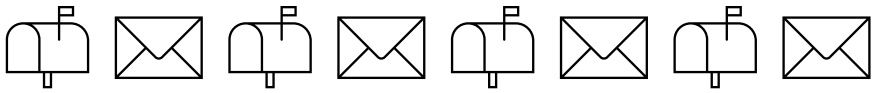
You don't have to repeat the same autobiographical information over & over, and potential pen friends will get a snapshot of you, but the format is a bit more interesting than a "Hello, fill-in-the-blank, do you want to be pen pals?"



Mockery & Failure

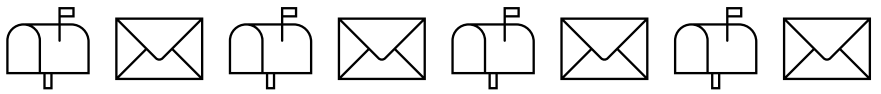
(Or, the shoemaker’s kids...)

One of my pen friend's kids made fun of her for having a pen pal because it's for "little kids," which is hilarious to me because my efforts at forcing / encouraging the little kids in my house to have pen pals has not been going that well.



Happy Mail

Long-letter pals are rad, but random happy mail and letters of support are always fun to get and fun to send! Let go of expectations & enjoy the journey! (After all, a letter from Australia – or across the street – might not find you for months! But when it does turn up in your mailbox, it will be a wonderful surprise.)



Pen Pal Books

A recently published book on the topic of pen pals that I really enjoyed is *The Correspondent* (recommended to me by a pen pal, and forwarded to another pen friend via media mail!).

Collected letters (epistolary anthologies) can be interesting –

but that's a story

for another zine!

He wrote secret notes to people he hadn't met yet. Some of them aren't even born, he said, but we live in a strange neighborhood & they will need help figuring things out & I won't always be around to explain it to them.

– Brian Andreas